

Virginia Strategic Planning for Statewide Interoperability

Focus Group 3



Harrisonburg, VA
April 20, 2004
Follow Up Report



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Introduction

The Governor of Virginia has recognized the need to address interoperability in communities throughout the Commonwealth and has charged the Office of Public Safety to design a strategic plan for statewide interoperability. The involvement of local and statewide emergency responders is essential to the success of developing a Statewide Interoperability Strategic Plan.

In order to develop a collaborative Statewide Interoperability Strategic Plan, the Office of Public Safety will be conducting six (6) focus group sessions, comprised mainly of informal and formal leaders from fire, law enforcement, and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) departments. Additional representation will include public health, local and state agencies in order to accurately capture local perspectives on the status of interoperable communications in Virginia.

The outcomes and purpose of the focus group sessions are as follows:

- ☐ Capture of local emergency responder perspectives on interoperable communications
- ☐ Shared understanding of interoperability issues specific to each region of VA
- ☐ Education and shared awareness of interoperability issues across stakeholder groups
- ☐ Attention paid to emergency responder commonalities as opposed to differences

Each focus group session is designed as a series of conversations centered on the following: interoperability, statewide and regional, as it relates to the current state, the case for why change needs to happen, the envisioned future state, recommended strategies to pursue, and barriers to achieving the future state.

Executive Summary

The Harrisonburg, Virginia focus group session on April 20, 2004 provided valuable input from the local perspective for the development of the Statewide Communications Interoperability Strategic Plan. The focus group identified the following major initiatives to be considered during the strategic planning session on May 18th: (1) 100% coverage of people in 100%

of the Commonwealth; (2) Real time information, anywhere; (3) Complete seamless interoperability between all disciplines; and (4) One mobile device/One band.

Detailed Overview



Current State

The objective of the Current State is to affirm the facts and identify the problems related to interoperability in day-to-day activities and mutual aid efforts.

The Harrisonburg focus group identified the following Current State themes specific to Day-to-Day interoperability:

- Lack of understanding by decision makers on the needs and costs for interoperable communications purchases
- Uncoordinated systems and procurements are segmenting responders
- Lack of technical ability to communicate car to car across agencies
 - Example: During a car chase, the officer pursuing the vehicle was not able to communicate directly with the deputy ahead to inform the deputy that the car being pursued was driving in the shoulder. In the time it took the officer to call into dispatch and have a dispatcher call to the deputy ahead up the road, the car being pursued crashed into the back of the deputy's car that was positioned on the shoulder of the road.*
- Policies and procedures are not enforced
 - Example: The Statewide Interdepartmental Radio System (SIRS) is available for the entire Commonwealth. However the SIRS channel is not designated as first*

responders primary radio channel and is no longer used for emergency only communications resulting in many radios being turned down and not monitored regularly.

- Every jurisdiction surrounding Culpeper is currently on different bandwidths
- Lack of uniformity between communication systems
Example: Culpeper County operates on 3 different frequencies. Police are UHF, Sheriffs are 39MHz, and Fire & Rescue are 33MHz

Example: Fire responders in Culpeper County often respond to fires in Orange County; however Culpeper's radios do not operate in Orange County, requiring Culpeper Fire responders to carry two radios: one operational in Culpeper and one operational in Orange County.

- Fauquier and Culpeper counties are transitioning to 800MHz Motorola system, providing system back up for each other and will realize \$1.2 million in cost saving as a result of a regional, rather than an uncoordinated, approach

The Harrisonburg focus group identified the following Current State themes specific to Mutual Aid interoperability:

- Lack of understanding and awareness of mutual aid channels
- Lack of pre-established agreements at various tiers of government
- Insufficient mutual aid channels to offer multiple channels in each region
- No standardized language between local, state, and federal entities
- Technology functionality and capabilities are rapidly changing, existing technology will soon be obsolete or inefficient

Case for Change

The objective of the Case for Change conversation is to discuss the consequences and implications if changes to Virginia's state of interoperable communications do not occur. The Case for Change statements should appeal to the emotions of individuals and result in action.

The Harrisonburg focus group identified the following Case for Change:

- Public safety is the primary responsibility of the government - commitment to community - communication interoperability between first responders is essential to saving lives
- Measure of efficiency: if citizens do not feel safe within their communities, then the government is not successful
- Investment for infrastructure:

- Regional approach in coordination with statewide strategic plan
 - Leverage resources to increase buying power; unit cost lowers when purchasing in bulk; cost savings/recovery will be realized from a coordinated effort rather than purchasing segmented non-compatible systems across regions
 - More flexible and upgradeable unified system is essential to keep up with the economic growth
- Scenarios:
- In a public safety related presentation a law enforcement officer was asked what one tool (weapon, radio, etc) he would choose if he was only able to have one, and the officer chose his radio over his weapon. When asking an officer the last time he had to pull his weapon, the response on average was one time in the past year. Upon asking the officer how often he uses a radio, the response was daily. In conclusion, a radio is an essential tool in a first responder's daily efforts to ensure public safety within his/her community.
 - A First Sergeant working with Bobby Ratliff offered this scenario to further demonstrate the need to enhance communications interoperability to protect the citizens and first responders of Virginia: A Fauquier County Deputy was shot and due to a lack of interoperability with the State Police, the suspect passed right by a trooper, who was unaware of the situation. Had communication functionality been available, the criminal would have been captured within minutes of the officer being shot.



Future State

The objective of the Future State conversation is to discuss what interoperability in Virginia should be.

The Harrisonburg focus group highlighted the following elements of the Future State of communications interoperability in Virginia:

- Field level responders are the point of focus, providing every responder in any physical location the ability to communicate with confidence to whomever they need, regardless of agency or level of government
- 100% coverage of people in 100% of the Commonwealth
- Real time information is available anywhere
- Complete seamless interoperability exists between all disciplines
- One mobile device/One band effectively mitigates emergencies and provides information to field responders without delay
- Mobile data terminals are in all identified vehicles and make it possible for first responders to share information and provide exact vehicle location
- A unified command and control system is used

Strategy

The purpose of the Strategy conversation is to identify the fundamental strategic initiatives essential to successfully implement a statewide interoperability plan in Virginia.

The Harrisonburg team identified the following critical initiatives to achieve communications interoperability statewide:

1. Establish regional representatives, for regions defined by the Governor, accountable for coordinating interoperability efforts within and across each region.
2. Enlist the media to assist in capturing public support that will generate awareness and understanding in public officials and promote investment in communications interoperability.
3. Drive private sector vendors into our open architecture and standards. Create incentives for suppliers to provide interoperable functionality to meet first responder needs rather than just selling what they have already developed.

4. Exploit cooperative purchasing power by educating the first responder community and buyers on statewide cooperative contracting and purchasing agreements allowing price breaks at the local level.
5. Establish plain language protocols to be adopted by all first responders in Virginia.

Next Steps

The outcomes from the six (6) regional focus group sessions will drive the strategic planning session so that the key initiatives identified can serve as the cornerstones of the Statewide Interoperability Strategic Plan. The strategic planning session is scheduled to take place in Richmond, Virginia on May 18, 2004.

There is a strong commitment to maintain the communication flow between the Office of Public Safety and the participants of each focus group as the planning for statewide interoperability in Virginia progresses. This report details the results of the Harrisonburg focus group meeting and was distributed to the participants by Friday April 23, 2004. In addition, the results of the conversations with all six (6) focus groups will be made available to all participants by early May.

When asked what the Harrisonburg team would do differently in the short term to improve interoperability in the northwest region, the following commitments were made:

- Gary DuBrueker, with the County of Frederick Fire and Rescue Department, will bring together representatives from all disciplines in his local jurisdiction to initiate a conversation on communications interoperability regionally and statewide.
- Mike Cocker and Bruce Sterling, with Virginia Department of Emergency Management, will promote the regional interoperability concept to both local and state agencies in their jurisdictions.
- Chris Essid, Commonwealth Interoperability Coordinator, will investigate leveraging Public Information Officers (PIOs) to draw media attention to interoperability needs.

Participants of the April 20, 2004 focus group meeting, in Harrisonburg, Virginia, on VA Strategic Planning for Statewide Interoperability:

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